



Montgomery County Community Action Board Testimony
County Council Bill 35-20 – Human Rights and Civil Liberties – Fair Criminal Records Screening
Standards – Amendments
Tuesday, September 15, 2020

Good afternoon. My name is Zelda Wafer-Alonge and I am a member of the Community Action Board Executive Committee. As advocates for the low-income community, the Community Action Board strongly supports Bill 35-20. We applaud the Council's efforts to expand the protections outlined in the 2014 "ban the box" bill, which our board proudly supported.

The Community Action Board advocates for policies and programs that help lower-income people move towards self-sufficiency. Considering the high cost of living in Montgomery County, our board recognizes that lower-income community members already face numerous challenges simply paying for the basic necessities. We strongly believe that the Council should make every effort to *remove* barriers to employment, thereby increasing the chances that someone may find a living wage job that offers critical work supports.

As you know, those with criminal records face many barriers and encounter discrimination on a regular basis. The National Employment Law Project found that a "conviction record reduces the likelihood of a job callback or offer by nearly 50%." It can also have a "chilling effect" by discouraging those with criminal records from even applying to certain jobs.¹ By expanding our County's "ban the box" protections to smaller employers, prohibiting employers from asking about criminal history before a job offer is extended, and banning employers from asking about certain crimes all together, this bill will increase opportunities for people who are hoping to improve their situations.

¹ <https://s27147.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Ban-the-Box-Fair-Chance-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

The needs of those exiting the Criminal Justice System were recently brought to light for our Board by a graduate of our advocacy training program, the Community Advocacy Institute. This graduate, Albert Reed, was released from federal prison after serving 25 years for a nonviolent offense. Albert was fortunate enough to have the support of his family to help him during this transition and he was able to establish his own Criminal Justice consulting firm, Albert Reed and Associates. He is now using his voice to advocate for others who struggle upon their release – people who face challenges obtaining stable housing, basic necessities, and adequate employment to become self-sufficient. Mr. Reed also submitted testimony in support of this bill and we hope that you will review his personal story very closely in considering this bill.

The Community Action Board strongly encourages the Council to continue to explore policy changes that will expand opportunities for all County residents. We applaud the Council's work to reduce the gender wage gap, prohibit discrimination based on hairstyle, and increase the County's minimum wage and other work supports. We look forward to working with the Council to support innovative policies that will help community members move towards self-sufficiency.